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TRAP PETER DUKE

BY
JAS D. MONTAGUE

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TRAPPER DUKE:

OR,

THE FEMALE AVENGER.

By JAMES D. MONTAGUE.

Author of "Leon the Outlaw," "Pinkerton's Boy Detectives," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

AN INHUMAN DEED.

"LAY on and spare not. I promised to rid the earth of these high-toned chaps who were too nice to notice common people. This war has brought its revenges, and I mean to have satisfaction."

The speaker, a tall, sallow-faced man, clad in a brigandish suit, with revolver and knife depending from his belt, addressed his words to a stout and villainous-looking man, who held a heavy whip made of twisted beach withes in his hand.

A man, slim and straight, with a patrician face and great deep-set black eyes, was bound to a tree near at hand. He was stripped to the waist, and already great livid welts marked the white flesh.

Grouped about under the trees were a dozen men, clad in suits of gray. To the left stood a woman, tall and comely, with great blue eyes and a mop of gold-brown hair, that fell to her waist.

Clutching at the woman's skirts was a child, a boy of less than four years.

It was a strange scene the sun looked down upon that pleasant autumnal morning—a scene tragical in every particular, and one long to be remembered by those participating therein.

The bound man glanced at the speaker with flashing eyes.

"You are a low, brutal coward, Morton Blazard," said the prisoner. "I never harmed you or yours in the past——"

"That's a lie," the captain of the troop interrupted with an oath. "You broke the match between Kitty Warner and myself by your lies. I was poor, you one of the aristocrats, with money, lands and slaves. I am all powerful now, and shall exterminate my enemies while I fight under the flag of the Southern Confederacy."

"You are a disgrace to any cause——"

"Lay on the stripes, Mondo."

The man with the scourge advanced once more.

"Gracious Heaven! have mercy."

It was the young wife of the poor bound victim that threw herself suddenly before Captain Blazard, with uplifted hands and pleading eyes.

"Mercy!" hissed the guerrilla chief. "There's no mercy in my heart for such as he."

"But George is a true Southerner. You profess allegiance to the Southern cause."

"Have done, woman," cried Blazard, angrily. "I tell you I have private wrongs to redress. There are others in this neighborhood who shall feel the strong arm of Blazard, the ranger chief. Mondo, do your duty."

But the woman had thrown herself upon the bound victim and Mondo, the giant whip-wielder, hesitated.

"The woman, Morton."

"To Hades with the woman!" yelled the angry chief, striding forward and grasping the young wife by the shoulder.

With one wrench he hurled her backward.

The woman staggered and fell prostrate to the ground, her little son clinging to her form and crying piteously.

Again the beech withe was hurled 'gainst the bound man.

At every stroke the green withes were stained with blood.

It was a horrible scene, and while George Loudon writhed and groaned in agony, the fiend who instigated the hellish deed, stood by and laughed at his groans.

"Groan and gnash your teeth," sneered Blazard. "I like to see you thus. Every twinge of pain gives me a thrill of pleasure. Lay on, Mondo, lay on, and spare not. Ha! see how he cowers under the blows. Lay on, lay on."

But Mondo, less cruel than his master, held his hand.

"The man will die, cap'n. He can't stand much more."

"Hold on a moment, then," cried the brutal Blazard, "I wish to continue the torture yet awhile longer."

He advanced and peered into the purple face of his victim.

"By thunder! Mondo, you've pretty nigh finished the scoundrel."

"It do look like it," grunted the whip-wielder. "I laid 'em on pretty heavy I tell yer."

"Look up, George Loudon. None of your 'possum tricks here," cried the outlaw leader, raising the man's head.

Then the captain started back with a low cry.

"The man's dead!" he exclaimed.

"Dead! my husband dead?"

It was a woman's voice, full of anguished emotion, that uttered these words.

Mary Loudon had regained her feet and stood staring wildly at the limp form of her murdered husband.

Still the little boy—their only child—clung to his mother's skirts, crying piteously.

"He seems to be dead," growled Captain Blazard. "You will do well to take yourself away from here. I do not make war upon women and children."

The woman seemed to pay no heed to the man's brutal words, but pressed forward and fell upon the neck of the corpse, where she gave way to the wildest cries and lamentations.

"Take her away," commanded Blazard at length. "We can't stand this woman's yawp."

Mondo laid his hand on the arm of the young widow, but the hand was flung aside with the vehemence of a tornado.

The next moment Mary Loudon stood facing the guerrilla chief, her face white as the dead, her deep blue eye blazing with a wild, intense fire that shot to the guilty soul of Morton Blazard like points of heated steel.

"Murderer!" she articulated in a hoarse voice.

"Tush, woman——"

"Look on your work," pursued the woman, unheeding the interruption. "The blood of George Loudon is upon your hands—innocent blood, drawn to appease the vile lust of a low, bestial nature. Look yonder," pointing upward as she spoke. "As sure as there is a God in Heaven, just so sure will this death be avenged!"

Then she bent down, grasped the boy in her hands, and raised him aloft.

"This boy is left me, thank Heaven! It shall be my self-appointed task to teach him to remember—to grow up with one object in life—the avenging of his father's death. Remember, Morton Blazard, and beware."

A deep silence reigned over the scene while the woman was speaking. When she had finished, she turned away. Her lithe form disappeared in the shadows of the wood, bearing her boy in her arms, and but few of the guerrillas had ever looked upon her face again.

Captain Blazard drew a long relieved breath after the woman had departed.

Even Mondo, the giant executioner, felt relieved.

"My soul, but there was the devil in that woman's eye!" said one of the guerrillas. "I wouldn't stand in your shoes for a farm, Captain Blazard."

The captain forced a laugh.

"Pish!" he said, lightly. "Women are given to saying extravagant things. 'Taint likely I'll ever look on the woman again."

"I should hope not, if I were you."

"Don't make mountains out of mole-hills!" snapped the captain. "Just cut this body down and put it out of sight. We've got a heap on our hands for the next week, I tell you."

"Exactly," muttered Mondo. "I don't think the Confederacy will make much off'n you, though. Beauty an' booty, regardless of politics, is your motto; eh, cap'n?"

"Yes; that's pretty near the truth, my man."

The guerrillas were not long in cutting down the dead body of young Loudon and planting it under the sod.

Loudon was a young planter of considerable wealth, and the guerrillas were anxious to put distance between themselves and the present neighborhood, as they feared the murdered man might have friends enough to seek to avenge his brutal murder.

Half an hour later the glade in the forest was vacated.

CHAPTER II.

THE AVENGERS SECURE A PRIZE.

It was in the fall of the year 1880,

A man stood on the brow of a high hill overlooking a vast expanse of undulating prairie land.

The man was rather short, immensely stout, with a heavy face, and brutal expression generally.

The fellow was clad in a semi-hunting costume, and held a rifle by the muzzle, while the breech rested on the ground.

His heavy, sodden eyes gazed out over the prairie.

"Well, I swow, I don't think I made much comin' ter the hills 'long o' the cap'n. Hain't he'd a big streak o' luck anyhow, and I 'low 'twould a paid us better ter staid in Westconsin, so 'twould."

Scarcely had the words passed the man's lips when the rattle of pebbles behind him attracted his attention.

He turned quickly to find himself covered by a deadly rifle in the hands of a young hunter.

"Hello!" exclaimed the elderly man, "what ye p'intin' that gun at me fur?"

"Drop your gun and throw up your hands."

"Well, I swow, this ere——"

An ominous click caused the burly hunter to release his clutch from the muzzle of his rifle.

It fell with a crash to the stony ground.

The young hunter uttered a sharp whistle, which had the effect to call a third person upon the scene.

The disarmed hunter uttered an exclamation, indicative of surprise if not of fear.

The new-comer was a woman, clad like an Indian princess, with fringed tunic and skirt, her limbs encased in leg-gins of exquisite neatness, fringed with scarlet silk.

In her hand she carried a light rifle.

There was one thing peculiar about this woman.

Her hair, which was cut short and circled her well-shaped head in a profusion of curls, was white as the driven snow.

Perhaps it was this latter mark which so astonished the burly hunter.

The woman drew a cord from her pocket and proceeded to bind the man's hands securely, the young hunter covering him meantime with his rifle.

Then the huntress stooped and picked up the fallen rifle and faced the stout prisoner.

"You do not seem to remember me, old man?" said the woman, piercing him with a look from her steel-blue eyes.

"I'm cursed ef I do," growled the man.

"Well, I remember you quite well," said the woman with emphasis. "Have watched you many times as you wandered away from camp."

"Why have you made me a prisoner?"

"Can you not guess?"

"Mebbe ye b'long ter Stonby's robber gang——"

"You are wrong," the woman interrupted. "You once belonged to a gang of cut-throats in Missouri."

"Eh—what dy'e mean?" cried the man, starting and twisting about uneasily.

"I mean that I know you, Carl Mondo—knew you to my hurt years ago, away in '62, when, under the garb of a confederate ranger, you disgraced the cause you pretended to

serve by butchering innocent people—making war even on women and children. Have you forgotten that time, Carl Mondo?"

"Don't know what yer drivin' at."

"Lying will do you no good," cried the woman sharply.

"I know you, and will not put up with any nonsense."

"Ye won't, hey?"

"No."

The man growled under his breath, and refused to meet the woman's glance again.

"Paul, come this way."

The young hunter, who appeared not more than two and twenty, advanced and stood beside the woman.

"My son, look at this man."

"I have looked at him, mother."

"Have you ever seen him before?"

"I think so."

"Eighteen years ago?"

"Yes, but of this I am not certain," said Paul. "I was but four years old when my father was murdered. That was an awful crime and, could I find his murderer, I should not hesitate to take his life."

"This man is the one who slew your father."

"No, no," cried the prisoner quickly. "You folks have made a mistake. My name's Duke Durly."

"Another lie," hissed the woman.

"It's heaven's truth, madame."

"That will do," said the huntress. "You murdered George Loudon eighteen years ago, but you were but the tool of a greater villain. I speak of Morton Blazard, who, if I have not been misinformed, lurks somewhere in these hills, under an assumed name. Am I right, Carl Mondo?"

"Can't tell ye nothin' 'bout it."

"We will see about that."

As the woman spoke she drew a revolver from under her tunic, and placed the muzzle against the prisoner's temple.

"What do you think now?"

"Oh, oh, good Lord, don't shoot!" gasped the man.

"You are Carl Mondo, are you not?"

"I—really, my good woman——"

Click!

Mrs. Loudon drew the hammer of her revolver.

"Yes, yes. I'm Carl Mondo."

"The man who murdered George Loudon eighteen years ago?"

"Really," gasped the villain, "this is too much."

"Well, it don't matter," said the fair avenger. "You have admitted enough. Of course, you can expect no mercy from the hands of the widow and son of the murdered man."

"My soul! you won't murder me?" whined the man, in abject terror.

"We are after larger game just at present," said the mountain queen, lowering her weapon, thus allowing Mondo to breathe easier.

Paul stood by, an interested listener.

"Of course, you can tell us of the whereabouts of your old captain, Morton Blazard," said Mrs. Loudon.

"I swow I can't."

Again the woman's pistol touched the man's temple.

"The truth, now, or you are a dead man," hissed the huntress, sharply.

"Well, well, ef I must tell, I s'pose I must."

"If you value your life you will tell all you know regarding Captain Blazard, and that right quickly," said Paul Loudon.

"He ain't fur off, ma'am," grunted the man, who seemed to stand in more fear of the woman than of her male companion.

"I am aware of that," returned Mrs. Loudon, "but what I wish to know is his exact whereabouts. The fortunes of war sundered us for a time, and threw me off the scent. I was forced to leave the bloody districts ravaged by both armies, and seek a home in the north. When the war closed I sought the old haunts of Morton Blazard in Missouri, but found him not. After that I gave over the search for a time, and settled down and gave my son the advantages of a partial education.

"He knows of the tragedy that deprived him of a kind and loving father, his mother of a strong and beloved husband, and together we seek to avenge that foul murder in the past. We have traced the murderer to this region, and it lies with you to point out his dwelling-place to us."

The woman's bosom heaved tumultuously, and her blue eyes were full of intense fire as she finished her long explanatory speech.

"Captain Blazard lives just north o' the town," said the prisoner the moment opportunity was given him to speak.

"North of Deadfall village?"

"Yes, marm."

"You are not lying about this?"

"As I live it are the truth," asserted Mondo. "Now jist you loosen these 'ere cords, an' I'll lead the way ter the cap'n's house."

"Couldn't think of it," said Paul. "You will lead the way as you are."

The villain uttered a remonstrance, but the muzzle of a rifle closed his mouth, and he no longer refused to obey, but moved off, followed by his captors.

CHAPTER III.

PAUL HEARS BAD NEWS.

THE trio moved down the hillside, and soon were treading the bottom of a narrow valley.

Along the bottom of this they passed for some distance, when they began the ascent of a rugged steep.

For half an hour the three toiled on, the women seeming to undergo the hardship with as much coolness as her male companions.

At the end of half an hour the trio gained the crest of a mountain spur. From this position they had an extended view of hill and valley for miles.

The attention of all was turned to the immediate vale below, where at the foot of the mountain, clustered two score huts, which formed the village known as Deadfall.

The town was composed mostly of miners, prospectors and roughs of the lowest class. There were several drinking saloons in the place, where at the gaming table or the bar, much of the dust dug from the mountain was turned into the coffers of the saloon proprietors.

Paul and his mother seldom ventured into the village, but for many weeks they flitted about the outskirts hoping to gain some information regarding the man they sought to punish for his many crimes.

On gaining the elevated position referred to, the three so strangely thrown together, came to a halt.

From their position a view of nearly every house in the village was to be had.

"Now," said the mountain huntress, "you will point out the house occupied by Captain Blazard."

"Jist cut these strings then," growled the man.

"No," said Paul, "that is entirely unnecessary."

"How'n thunder can I p'int out anythin' 'thout hands," growled Mondo, sullenly.

The woman suddenly pressed her revolver against the villain's temple.

"Which is the house?" she questioned sternly.

"The one over yender," nodding with his head.

"The log cabin to the right, near the foot of the hill."

"Yes, the one wi' the leonto at the back, thet stands furdereest to the right, that's the cap'n's house!"

"Are you sure?"

Paul Loudon put the question with a slight start.

"I'm sure, boss."

A groan fell from the young man's lips.

For some minutes he seemed deeply moved. At length he turned once more upon Mondo.

"This man, Blazard, lives in Deadfall, under an assumed name?"

"P'raps he does, youngster."

"What name does he bear now?"

"W'at's the odds?"

"Give us the name," from Mrs. Loudon, sharply.

"You be most confounded petiel'ar," growled Mondo.

"I've p'inted out the house which's all I greed ter do."

Again the pistol muzzle pressed the prisoner's temple.

"Give us the name."

"Consarn it——"

"The name, or you die!" hissed the wronged woman sharply, her slender finger pressing the trigger of her weapon.

"Felix Gormond."

"And Angevine is his child?"

With this exclamation, Paul Loudon turned white as death and reeled backward, nearly falling.

Mondo regarded him wonderingly.

"How did you know the name o' his darter?" questioned Mondo suddenly.

"It matters not," from the woman. "If you have lied to us it will go hard with you, Carl Mondo."

"But it's Heaven's truth I'm tellin' ye," asserted Mondo.

"I cannot believe this," groaned Paul.

"I feared you'd experience trouble from your association with Angevine," said the woman. "If this fellow speaks the truth, it's all over between you and that girl, Paul."

"I fear so," gasped the youth, with pale face and compressed lips.

"In love with the cap'n's gal, eh?" chuckled the prisoner.

No answer was vouchsafed to this.

Felix Gormond was well known to Paul Loudon. He

had visited the cabin many times, and the sweet face and sunny smile of Angevine Gormond had been the attraction.

Now what did he hear?

That Angevine, whom he loved better than his own life, was the daughter of his father's murderer.

The realization was terrible, and for a time Paul was completely unmanned. His mother, too, was deeply moved, but could offer no word of consolation.

"See here," growled Mondo, "you folks hev hed enough o' me, I reckon. 'Sposen ye jist cut this yere string an' let me loose."

The mountain huntress shook her silver head. "Never, Carl Mondo," she said. "It was your hand that laid my poor George low; you are equally guilty with the scoundrel, Blazard, and with him shall answer for your crime with your life."

"Then you mean to murder me arter all," growled Mondo.

"Not just yet. You are the lesser villain of the two whose lives we seek. Perhaps we may have use for you hereafter. You will accompany us to our home in the mountains, after which we will decide upon what course to pursue."

At first the burly prisoner seemed disposed to find fault with this mode of procedure, but Mary Loudon's revolver soon quieted him, and he suffered himself to be driven away a captive."

Once more the trio passed over the mountain spur, and the village of Deadfall was no longer visible.

Paul came to a sudden halt.

"What now?" from his mother.

"I'm goin back."

"What do you mean?"

"You do not fear to take this man to our retreat alone, mother?"

"No, but——"

"I must go to Deadfall. I can't stand this suspense," groaned the young man.

"What good can come of your returning to the town? I do not think it safe for you under the roof of Morton Blazard."

"As safe now as it ever has been," said Paul. "I must see Angevine once more. Before I sleep I will know the truth or falsity of this man's assertions."

"You will be careful, Paul?"

"Very careful, mother."

"On your life do not reveal your identity to that man. Did he know that you were the son of George Loudon, he would not hesitate to put a bullet through your brain."

"I do not doubt it. I shall be careful, mother."

"Very well. You will return to night?"

"Yes, early. You think you can manage the prisoner?"

"Easily."

"Then I bid you good-bye for the present."

The young hunter raised his mother's hand to his lips, then turned and hurried away.

A feeling of hope shot into the heart of Carl Mondo.

Guarded by a woman alone, he certainly had some show for escape.

"Go on," commanded the mountain huntress, presenting her revolver.

Without a word the man passed on down the hill.

Once more the two stood in the shadowed valley they had crossed once before that day.

Mondo was meditating an escape.

If he should break and run he might escape, but the chances were against it. The huntress had a keen eye and was a dead shot he felt sure, but Mondo believed he had friends not far away, and he resolved on retarding progress as much as possible.

He struck his foot against a stone, and stumbled.

When he regained his feet he limped, and walked with seeming difficulty.

"You are injured?" said the woman.

"Aye, badly I fear," returned the man, with a groan, sinking to a seat upon a rock.

"That is bad. I may have to shoot you to save trouble," was the woman's grim retort.

The burly villain noted the glow in the woman's eyes, and he sprang to his feet right quickly.

Almost on the instant several dark forms appeared suddenly from the rocks and bushes, men clad in rough garb, each bearing a carbine.

Carl Mondo uttered a cry of joy.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TABLES TURNED—EXCITEMENT.

HALF a score of men filed into the little valley and surrounded the mountain huntress and her prisoner.

As we have said, Carl Mondo uttered a cry of joy, for he recognized friends in the troop.

"You a prisoner?" exclaimed the leader of the troop advancing. "Well, well, captured and bound by a woman!"

"Jest cut these yere strings, will ye?" growled Mondo, without offering to notice the other's sarcasm.

"Stop!"

The word was spoken sharply as the outlaw captain advanced to obey the burly prisoner's request.

He halted suddenly as a revolver peered into his face.

"This man is my prisoner," said the woman. "You have no right to set him free. I hope Stonby does not war on women."

"Ha! how know you that I am Stonby?"

"One might easily guess that," returned the woman.

"Will you cut these strings?" growled Mondo, impatiently.

The outlaw seemed to hesitate.

"Fool!" hissed Mondo. "Cap'n Stonby, ef you 'low that female ter escape you'll rue it. P'raps ye don't know she's Mrs. Loudon o' Missouri."

At this announcement the outlaw captain started, and gazed sharply into the woman's face.

For an instant the two gazed, then Mrs. Loudon uttered a low cry and thrust her weapon full in the face of the outlaw.

"Morton Blazard!" she exclaimed, at the same time pressing the trigger.

But one of the outlaws saw her intention, and struck up her hand in time to save the captain's life.

Before the woman could use her pistol a second time, strong hands seized upon her, and she was disarmed.

"Bind the wench," commanded Captain Stonby.

One of the men produced a cord, and the mountain huntress was soon securely bound.

White as death she stood, facing the brutal outlaw captain, the rays of the descending sun touching her abundant curls of silver, rendering them radiant with a strong beauty that did not escape the notice of her captors.

Mondo's bonds had been severed, and he forced himself to the front, a brutal smile on his brawny face.

"Ha! ha! my old gal," chuckled the former prisoner, "so you wanted ter see Mort Blazard, did ye? Awful kind in him ter come round, warn't it now, ole woman?"

Mrs. Loudon paid no heed to the man's words.

She realized that she was helpless, and a feeling akin to despair whelmed her soul.

"Stand back," commanded the outlaw captain. "I'd like a word with ther woman myself."

Mondo moved aside, the captain taking his place.

"Strange that we should meet again after so many years," said Stonby. "Let me see; 'twas in '62 that we met last, was it not, my dear Mary?"

"Villain!" said the woman, "it is in your nature to bring up the past to torture me."

"Exactly, my dear. You promised to see me again when we stood under the trees in that Missouri woods, eighteen years ago. I'm sorry it's been so long deferred, but it's better late than never, you know. Then I was Captain Blazard of the Confederate forces, now I am Captain Stonby of the Mountain Rangers. It's lucky I captured you as I did, for I've no doubt you meditated some injury to me, else you would never have followed me here."

"I meant to kill my husband's assassin."

"Tut, woman," said the outlaw. "That was an act of war."

"A cold-blooded, brutal murder," asserted the woman.

"Well, we won't quarrel over names," said Stonby. "You and me are older now. There's plenty of men in the world, a sight better ones than George Loudon, too. Why not marry again and forget the past?"

The keen eyes of the free ranger, as he termed himself, were fixed on the face of the fair prisoner.

"Why will you torture me, villain?" groaned the woman. "Have you no mercy in your black heart?"

"None whatever, my aged darling," returned Stonby, with a sneering laugh. "I sent George Loudon to the better land; to revenge myself on him, now it becomes my duty to send his widow to keep him company."

As the villain made this cold-blooded assertion, he raised his revolver and pointed it at the woman's breast.

She did not flinch, but looked him squarely in the eye.

"You don't scare very easily," he said, as he cocked his weapon.

"I do not fear to die."

"Indeed!" sneered Stonby. "If you die your vengeance can never fall upon me——"

"No," she interrupted; "but there is one who inherits the Loudon blood who will live to avenge me and mine."

"Ha! what do you mean?"

"I'll tell yer," grunted Mondo. "She speaks o' Paul, her son."

"Her son?" ejaculated the outlaw chief. "He lives, then?"

"He does. "You have met him many times."

"How is that?"

"At your home in Deadfall. The young cub hez been sparkin' Miss Angevine."

"By the powers of mud!" exclaimed the outlaw chief. "I might have known it. Bless me, how time flies. I have remembered Paul, only, as a little four-year-old, and here he is a man grown."

"An' a mighty tough young cub he is, too, boss."

"Well, we'll attend to him. Where is he now?"

"In Deadfall, I expect; gone ter see Angevine. He'll be back this way to'ards night."

"Good," ejaculated the captain, smiting his thigh with the flat of his hand. "I will exterminate the Laudons this very day. I thank you, madam, for your information, and assure you that Paul shall keep you company on your journey to the other world."

"Paul will not fall into your hands," retorted Mrs. Loudon.

"We will see."

Captain Stonby ordered four men to pass up the mountain side and secrete themselves near the path which Paul Loudon would doubtless follow on his return.

"There," said the outlaw, after the four men had departed led by Mondo. "What think you now of your son's chances?"

"Providence, will protect the innocent."

"I'm glad you think so. But I have wasted enough breath on you. I will put an end to this at once."

Again he raised his revolver.

Before he could pull the trigger a hand was laid on his arm.

"Don't fire, cap'n."

"Eh! what now?" and the captain turned half-angrily upon the interrupter.

"'Twould make trouble ef ye shot the woman hyar."

"How's that, Dowd?"

"Duke Durley's in this ere neighborhood, smellin' 'round fur no good. Now 'sposen ye take the woman ter camp an' gin her a chance ter confess. Likely she's a poor sinner."

"I'll do it," said the captain. "We may learn something of importance from her. I'd like to torture her a little, anyhow, to pay her for trying to murder me."

Then he turned to the prisoner and laid his hand on her arm.

"Come," he said, "we will get out of this. When the boys come in to-night they will bring your son. You shall both swing from the same gallows."

The outlaws moved away.

They left the little valley shortly and passed over a mountain ridge, then down into a gulch, in the bottom of which was a growth of stunted trees.

It was beneath the shelter of these trees that the band came to a halt, where a bright stream of water threw a thousand sparkles up to the face of the sun.

Several men sat about on the grass, an old army tent forming shelter for some of the band.

Mrs. Loudon gazed about upon the dark faces of the outlaws.

There was not an intelligent face among them.

Their natures were all cast in the lower strata of human

existence, and the woman knew that she could expect no sympathy—no mercy from these embroiled villains.

Whatever Captain Stonby willed, these wretches would carry out without the least compunction.

The fair prisoner was bound securely to a tree on one side of the camp-ground, and left to her own reflections for a time, while the outlaws amused themselves telling stories and smoking their pipes.

Towards dark a crash of steps warned the outlaws of the approach of some person. All sprang to their feet and grasped their arms, just as Carl Mondo rushed upon the scene, panting with excitement, his face and clothes spattered with blood.

CHAPTER V.

PAUL AND ANGEVINE.

PAUL LOUDON passed from the sight of his mother, little dreaming of the danger which encompassed her.

He had no fear about entering the village, as he was on friendly terms with the honest portion of the citizens, and as for the others, he seldom came in contact with them, since he never visited the liquor and gambling dens.

The cabin, occupied by Felix Gormond and his daughter, stood near the outskirts of Deadfall, close up against the mountain.

Paul was in a far from enviable mood as he looked into the eyes of Angevine Gormond that day and tried to read there the truth or falsity of Carl Mondo's assertions.

"Father is not at home," said the girl, in answer to a question from the young mountaineer.

"Will you come out and walk a bit, Angie?"

Certainly she would.

Donning an old-fashioned hood, the girl stole from the house beside the handsome Paul Loudon.

A few rods from the house they came to a halt.

Paul looked into the gentle, winning face before him, and found himself wondering if this pretty, noble-minded girl could possibly be the offspring of such a villain as Paul knew Morton Blazard to be.

"You seem unusually sober to-day, Paul."

"And I have good reason to feel so," was the response.

"Angie, do you know Carl Mondo?"

"A man by that name comes here sometimes."

"To see your father?"

"Yes."

The cloud deepened on the brow of the youth.

It was evident that his worst fears were to be realized.

"That man is a villain, Angie."

"I never liked his looks," confessed the girl.

"What business can he have with your father?"

"I'm sure I have no means of knowing that."

"Your father is absent much of the time, is he not?"

"More than half the time."

"Exactly," muttered the youth.

Angie's father had murdered his parent in the long ago—that fact was destined to separate these young people forever.

Paul groaned, and turned aside.

"What troubles you, Paul? Will you not confide in me?" cried Angevine, quickly.

How could he tell her?

No, no, it would be cruel to do so.

He held the maiden's hand while a terrible struggle passed in his mind.

The daughter of his father's assassin. Yes, it was true, and he had but one course to pursue now—give up all claim to the hand of the girl he had loved so dearly.

"Good-bye, Angie," he said. "If we never meet again do not blame me."

"But I shall blame you," cried the girl, with impetuosity. "If you go away and never come back, I shall know that you never cared for me—that you are a wicked schemer——"

"Stop, Angie; this is too much."

"Then explain. What have I done to cause you to feel thus?"

"Nothing."

"Yet you talk of never seeing me again?"

"True. Fate has so willed it, Angie."

"Fate?"

"Even so."

"Will you explain, Paul?"

"Do not urge me, Angie. You will learn the truth in good time, but other lips than mine must tell you the truth. Good-bye, my darling."

He turned after kissing her hand, and would have fled.

But she sprang before him and thrust out both hands to keep him back.

"No, Paul Loudon, you cannot go in this way," the girl said firmly. "I must know the truth—know if you have been deceiving me all these weeks. It is no light thing to win a girl's heart and cast it aside as the veriest bauble. Were you aware of this, Paul?"

Her face was as pale as death, yet there was no quiver in her voice as she talked.

Paul shrank from her gaze like one guilty of some crime.

"Let me go, Angie."

"Not until you tell me the truth."

"I tell you the hand of fate has come in between you and me, Angie; more I will not say."

Her hands dropped from his shoulders, a faint flush chasing the unearthly pallor from her cheeks.

"Go, traitor!" she cried, fiercely. "Too craven-hearted to tell the truth, you cast me off with this lie. No, I will not forgive you, Paul Loudon. Base hypocrite! I am glad I have found you out now. From this time forth I hate as I once loved."

Before he could speak or offer a detaining hand, the girl turned and fled from the spot, leaving the young hunter standing like one in a dream, gazing blankly after her retreating form.

At length he recovered his senses, and started to follow the maiden.

"It was better for her not to know," he mused. "Yet, I cannot find it in my heart to blame her for the way she received my announcement."

The youth remembered that he had left his rifle at the house, and thither he went for it, hoping, yet dreading, to look once more upon Angie.

He found his rifle where he had left it, just inside the door, but Angevine Gormond was nowhere to be seen.

Perhaps it was as well so. She hated and cursed him now, and the love once existing must be torn from his heart if he would hope for happiness in the future.

Grasping his rifle Paul hurried from the vicinity of the cabin.

In his present mood he cared not to meet the man who had murdered his father, well knowing that such a meeting would end in blood. For Angevine's sake he would not meet her father here.

But the time would come when he must meet and settle the deadly feud long existing between the Blazards and Loudons.

Paul remembered the scene under the pines of Missouri. Though but a child then, he had not forgotten the scene of blood, and he would have been less than human had he not felt anxious to avenge the cruel murder of his father.

Once more he stood upon the mountain spur and gazed down into the little valley below, where he had parted from his mother.

All seemed peaceful and quiet in the vale.

After one glance backward, the young hunter passed over the ridge and descended into the valley.

Scarcely had his feet touched the sod at the foot of the rocky hill-side, when four dark forms flung themselves from the bushes upon the young hunter.

Our young friend was taken by surprise, yet he was not to fall an easy victim to his cowardly assailants.

Two of them were hurled back with stunning force.

Paul recognized Mondo, and knew that ill had befallen his mother. This thought nerved the youth with the fury of despotism.

"Take the young cub, alive," cried Mondo. "It's cap'n's orders."

Again Paul found strong hands clutching at his throat.

He managed to free his right hand as he was falling, this held his revolver, which he fired full in the face of one of his assailants.

One of the outlaws fell with a bullet through his brain.

Paul found his arm stricken down, and reeling, he fell with two of the ruffians a-top.

"Bring the cord, Mondo, an' we'll tie the skunk."

Ere Mondo could comply with this request, another actor appeared upon the scene.

Two ruffians, who held Paul, were hurled backward like dry sticks, and he found himself lifted to his feet by a strong hand.

"Snakes an' alligators!" ejaculated the new-comer, a tall, gray-bearded man, clad in bear-skin from the top to toe. Spang!

The man in bear-skin had thrust out a hand, and fired suddenly, sending a second outlaw to grass.

Mondo uttered a cry of terror and fled precipitately, while the only remaining villain found himself clutched in the bony fingers of the new arrival.

"Snakes an' alligators!" again ejaculated the old hunter, as he shook the outlaw until his teeth rattled.

CHAPTER VI.

TRAPPER DUKE TO THE RESCUE.

PAUL recovered his revolver and fired after the fleeing Mondo, but without effect.

Two of the outlaws lay dead, while the giant stranger held his man at arm's length and shook him fiercely.

"Toads and pothooks, wot does this mean?"

Paul turned toward the speaker in pleasant surprise.

"You have captured one of the villians it seems?"

"I hev," said the hunter, "an' I'll rattle all his teeth down his throat ef he don't give an account of himself."

"I think we'd best bind him," said Paul.

"Exactly, youngster. Jist jab yer hand inter one of my pockets an' bring out a cord. I allus go prepared."

The youth hunted along the side of the bearskin for some moments ere he found the pocket.

The old hunter chuckled.

"Can't ye find it, bub?"

"Yes—at last," and Paul thrust his hand in a deep opening under the hunter's arm, and drew forth a stout buckskin cord.

With this he proceeded to bind the hands and feet of the captured outlaw.

"Thar," ejaculated the giant hunter, "now we'll set this chap up an' see wot he's made of."

"He belongs to a gang of outlaws, I'm thinking," said Paul.

"Exactly: ter Stonby's pesky gang."

"That is my opinion. I think they meant to kill me."

"You be Mistress Loudon's boy, I take it," and the old hunter turned and looked curiously into Paul's face.

"You have guessed the truth."

The hunter extended his horny hand.

"Put it thar, youngster."

The youth placed his hand in the old man's palm.

"You're a trump, Mister Loudon, an' I'm glad ter know you."

"May I know your name?"

"Sartin. I'm Duke Durley hereabouts."

"And I have heard of you, sir," said Paul.

"Never heard nothin' bad of me I hope, lad."

"I have heard of you as a great hunter and free trapper."

"Exactly."

The hunter laughed aloud.

"Sakes alive!" he said, "you're a smart chip of the old

block I reckon. You war pilin' these cusses up good when I came along."

Paul seemed puzzled.

"You knew my father, then?" he said, in evident surprise.

"Downright well. He war a trump, though pretty high-toned. Yes, he an' I war friends 'fore the wa'."

The speaker sighed, and looked pensively at the ground.

"I have to thank you for saving my life," said Paul.

"No, you haven't. Whar's yer mother?"

"I don't know," said Paul.

"Don't know! Well, that's cur'us."

"Not so curious after all. I left that infernal Mondo bound and under her charge, while I went to Deadfall. I fear she has either been murdered or fallen into the hands of our old enemy, Morton Blazard."

"By hok! it looks a little that way."

"I must take the trail of the villains at once," cried Paul.

"If harm comes to my mother, Blazard shall rue it to his last day."

"Exactly."

Grasping his rifle Paul was about to move away.

"Hold a bit," said Durley.

The youth turned and faced the speaker.

"These hills are full of thievin' cut-throats, Mr. Loudon."

"I expect so."

"Better go kinder slow, or old Blazard'll hev his grip onto you, in which case, good-bye, Paul."

"What would you suggest?"

"Thet you let me help you."

"Will you?" cried the young man eagerly.

"In course I will. There's nothin' mean 'bout me, youngster. When I see folks in difficulty, I ginerally helps 'em out ef I can."

"Many thanks. Let us go at once——"

"Not so fast," Durley interrupted.

"But my mother may be murdered while we remain here."

"Ef she's alive now, thar's no liklihood of her dyin' fur the present. Now it never pays ter fly off the handle, youngster, jest you 'member that."

"But——"

"Now, see here; let me manage this case, will you? I'm no friend of Blazard's. He's a curse ter thar world, an' the sooner he goes under the better. He's in these mountains, though, wi' a score of men, and tain't best ter go after him in a blind way."

"True," returned Paul. "I bow to your more experienced judgment. What is your plan?"

"We'll question this cuss fust," indicating the bound outlaw with a jerk of his gray head.

"I had not thought of that," from Paul.

"Course not. You war goin' it blind."

Duke Durley faced the outlaw, who reclined on the grass but a few feet away.

"You b'long ter Stonby's gang?"

No reply.

Durley scowled and touched the man with his foot.

"Did yer hear me, you lantern-jawed ape?"

"Eh?" growled the man, surlily.

"You belong to the Stonby's gang, I said."

"Did yer?"

"No smartness, now," said the trapper, "I mean business, I do."

At the same time Durley dropped the muzzle of his long rifle to the face of the prisoner.

"Don't shoot!" cried the man, in a startled tone.

"Not ef you answer questions as you'd order."

"I will."

"You are one of Stonby's outlaws?"

"I'm one o' his free-rangers."

"Well, we won't quarrel as ter names, though I reckon ye mean free robbers instead," said Durley. "Now tell me where the outlaws are camped."

"Don't know."

Click!

The trapper drew the hammer of his rifle.

"No lies, you skunk, or I'll bore ye through."

The bronzed face of the prisoner changed color.

"I tell ye Heaven's truth," said the man. "Stonby moves about pretty often, an' I can't just tell ye whar he'll be ter-day."

"Whar'd he tell yer ter meet him?"

"In one o' the gulches north o' here."

"Exactly. Mrs. Loudon is in the outlaws' hands?"

"They have a woman pris'ner."

"Exactly. What hev they done with her?"

"Don't know."

"She is alive yet?" questioned Paul, bending forward with eager intentness.

"She war a few hours ago," returned the prisoner.

Durley reflected a minute.

"You can lead us ter this gulch, Mr. Outlaw?"

"Mebbe I might."

"Exactly, an' you'll do it, too, or get a bullet through yer innards!" said the trapper, with grim emphasis.

It was nearly night now.

In the valley long dark shadows fell.

The trapper stooped and with his knife severed the cords that bound the prisoner's feet.

"Up, now, an' travel!" growled Duke Durley.

Without assistance the outlaw gained his feet.

After shaking himself he signified his readiness to proceed.

"Had we not best dispose of these?" and Paul pointed to the dead outlaws.

"Not now," returned Durley. "Ther friends'll find 'em, I reckon, an' save us the trouble."

This seemed to satisfy Paul.

The three men passed out of the valley and were soon pushing forward on the trail of the outlaws.

They had gone but a short distance when Durley called a halt.

"What now?" from Paul.

"We're pesky fools, I take it," said the trapper; bringing down the breech of his rifle with a thud.

"I do not understand," said Paul.

"Come on, ef yer want ter meet Stonby," growled the prisoner, impatiently.

"We've gone fur enough in this way," said Durley.

"Tain't mor'n likely thet Stonby'd send men on the back trail when thet cuss of a Mondo reports; eh, Paul?"

"I believe you are right," said Paul.

"You bet I am. The gent here'll tell us whar the camp is, an' we'll take another course ter git thar."

"You're feared to go on," sneered the prisoner.

"We don't mean ter run inter no 'buscade, anyhow," was the trapper's rejoinder.

CHAPTER VII.

PREPARING FOR THE TORTURE.

MONDO stood in the outlaw camp, panting for breath, and unable to speak for some moments.

All eyes were fixed oh him, fear and amazement pictured on more than one face.

"What's up now?" thundered the outlaw chief, grasping Mondo by the shoulder and shaking him lustily. "Can't you speak, man?"

"I—I—murder!" gasped the man.

"Thunder and Mars!" cried Morton Blazard, "have you lost what little sense you ever had?"

"N-no," breathed the panting outlaw, "but it's awful. All killed but me."

"Killed!"

"Aye! shot down in cold blood."

"Furies!" screamed the captain. "Mondo, you are a cowardly fool, and your companions worse yet, to let one man, and he a boy, use you up in this style."

"But let me tell you how 'twas."

"Very well, heave ahead."

Carl Mondo proceeded to relate the mishaps of the day,

how he and his friends had well nigh overpowered Paul Loudon, when a giant animal, looking more like a monstrous bear than aught else, had assaulted them, and in the flash of an eye, slain his companions.

"'Twas a miracle that I escaped, even," concluded Mondo.

"This animal could shoot, it seems," said the captain.

"Yes."

"I know the chap," cried one of the men. "Thar's only one man in these parts as gits himself up in sich togs, an' that's ole Duke Durley."

Captain Stonby's face paled a trifle at this announcement.

"Duke Durley," he muttered.

"You've heerd of him, cap'n?"

"I have," was the reply. "If he is on our track he means mischief. I've no doubt he is employed by the government to look after us."

A dead silence reigned over the outlaw camp for a time.

Mrs. Loudon, bound and helpless though she was, felt thrilled with hope when she learned of the escape of Paul from the clever trap set for him by the outlaws.

"Did I not tell you Providence would protect my boy?" said the woman, as her old enemy walked over towards her.

"You did, but 'twas Duke Durley instead of Providence," growled the captain. "I have an idea that another sort of Providence will put both Durley and your son under the sod inside of four and twenty hours."

There was a grim menace in his tones not pleasant to the fair prisoner's ear.

Stonby or Blazard, as we shall hereafter call the outlaw captain, consulted with his men for some time.

The result of this consultation was the departure of six of the outlaws to look after Paul and his new-found friend.

These six men were led by an experienced mountaineer, one not easily fooled.

Darkness had crept up over mountain and valley now.

The outlaws, who seemed to have no fear of danger to themselves, kindled a fire, around which they sat and smoked.

Captain Blazard walked moodily up and down with his head bowed upon his breast.

Presently he paused in front of Mrs. Loudon.

"Woman," he said, hoarsely, "you have brought me into my present trouble."

"You are in trouble, then, Felix Gormond."

"Ha!" cried the outlaw with an oath. "So you know——"

"That you have been training under several aliases," cried the woman quickly. "In Deadfall you are known only as Felix Gormond. Here, in the mountains, among your own gang, you answer to the name of Stonby, a name that even the scum of Deadfall hate——"

"And fear as well, madam."

"True, but had the people of the town once suspected that the foul murderer, Captain Stonby, lurked in their midst under the name of Gormond, how long would you have lived?"

"Not long," confessed the captain with a forced laugh.

"I know you as Morton Blazard," pursued the woman. "That is your true name, one black with a thousand stains. Reeking with blood you fled from Missouri directly after the war, to escape the vengeance of those you had wronged—whose homes you had despoiled."

"Enough of this."

"No, this shall be dinned into your ears until——"

"Until I close your mouth," hissed Blazard angrily. "I'll do it right quickly, too."

"Even if I should die, there are others to rise up and tread you into the earth, vile assassin."

A black look swept the captain's face.

He turned on his heel and spoke to Mondo.

The man answered his call quickly.

"You have a good strong arm, Carl."

"There's not a weak sinew in it," grunted the man.

"You wielded the whips to perfection in the olden time, we will see what you can do in that line to-night."

"Eh, cap'n? I don't jestly catch on."

"You will pretty quick," returned Blazard. "Prepare a good beech withe, one that is tough and will not break."

The man turned away.

"What are you about to do, Morton Blazard?"

"You'll learn soon enough, my dear Mary," sneered the brutal villain. "You've been pretty free with your tongue since I captured you. I've an idea 'twould be a good plan to cut out your gabbling tongue, and cast it to the winds. What think you of that?" and the villain laughed sardonically.

"You are capable of even that villainy I do believe," rejoined the bound woman with a shudder.

Again the outlaw laughed horribly.

"Mary, on one condition I'll spare your life," he said, leaning forward so that the glow from the camp-fire illumined his sallow features.

"What do you mean? Would you murder me?"

"Aye, joyfully," with a hideous laugh. "I will spare your life on one condition, however."

"Well?"

"Be Mrs. Blazard."

"What!"

"Be my wife, my dear. Wouldn't that be poetic justice though. Methinks George Loudon——"

"Inhuman fiend!" exclaimed the bound woman, as the sallow, devilish face of the outlaw captain was thrust into hers, a hideous grin disfiguring his uncomely visage.

"You won't do it, eh?"

"Become the wife of George's assassin!" a lofty scorn in voice and mien. "I'd die ten thousand deaths rather."

"Oh, well, I ain't peticular. I didn't expect you'd accept. Really, I'm glad you didn't, as I'd find you an elephant on my hands too big to manage, I'm thinkin'."

The firelight danced on the faces of the twain, touching the silver locks on the woman's head, wreathing them into a glowing crown above the fair unwrinkled brow.

Mary Loudon had been a beautiful woman once, and even now much of that beauty remained.

The brutal Blazard seemed to notice this.

"Inside of ten minutes you'll weep tears of blood for your insolence," he cried, a gleam of savage satisfaction in his eyes.

"I have not been insolent. You are the one——"

"Tut, Mary, no accusations now. You have sought my life for years. Is it not so?"

"It is true."

"Exactly. In the game, you lost, and I held the winning hand. I do not care to set you free to prey upon me like some wild animal. You shall die to-night."

At this moment Mondo approached with a bundle of switches. He was weaving them together as he advanced.

"Well done, Mondo. I wish to see how neatly you can cut this woman's dress into strings. You understand."

"What, do you mean for me to strike her, cap'n?"

"That's exactly what I mean, my man."

"I—I'd rather be excused, boss."

On the instant Blazard drew his revolver and leveled it at the head of the whip-bearer.

"Do as I bid—understand?"

"Aye, captain," and the cringing coward slunk forward to the side of the bound and helpless captive.

"I don't want, madame, but——"

"No growling, sir, but lay on the whip," thundered Blazard, thrusting his cocked revolver into Mondo's face.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE OUTLAWS SURPRISED—A SHARP TRICK.

"STOP!" commanded Mrs. Loudon, as Mondo raised his whip and was about to strike.

The man hesitated.

"Beware how you harm me, Carl Mondo," said the woman, flashing a sharp look into the coward's face. "I

have friends who will wreak an awful vengeance on the ones who——"

"Furies!" yelled Blazard, interrupting the prisoner. "I'll have no further nonsense. Lay on the whip, or I'll let out your heart's blood."

Again Mondo raised the instrument of torture.

It started to descend upon the shoulders of the helpless woman.

Half way down the whip fell from the stout hand of Carl Mondo.

A wild, agonized cry fell on the evening air, and Mondo, the executioner, lay a bleeding corpse at the feet of his chief!

Echoing and re-echoing along the rugged mountain side rang the report of a rifle, from which a bullet had sped to the heart of Carl Mondo.

"Fire low, lads, and we'll drop every mother's son of 'em," shouted a stentorian voice from the bushes to the left.

Instantly all was commotion and wild alarm in the outlaw camp. Arms were grasped, and bearded men stood trembling in vague uncertainty, awaiting the onset of an unseen foe.

For a few brief minutes the prisoner at the tree was forgotten, and Blazard turned his attention to repelling the onset of the foe, consisting of United States troops he believed.

A single shot fired from the bushes sent another outlaw to grass.

During the confusion, no one noticed the dark form which stole up to the tree behind the prisoner.

"Charge, boys, and cut down the enemy," shouted the outlaw chief, bounding forward at the head of his men.

Several shots met the charge, the outlaws answering with a volley as they rushed forward.

Through the bushes they dashed, expecting to meet a formidable foe. To their astonishment, no one opposed their progress. The enemy had suddenly disappeared.

While Blazard stood in wonder, gazing about, a loud laugh came, borne down to his ears from the mountain side.

"Furies!" yelled the outlaw, firing his revolver in the direction of the laugh.

"Fire away, you guerrilla thief, you can't hurt Prince Warren."

"Prince Warren!"

"The outlaw uttered the name huskily, a white look of fear crossing his face.

"Ha, ha, ha! tremble in your boots, Guerrilla Morton. The hand of a wronged Missourian will yet find your heart's blood."

"Death and furies!" screamed the outlaw, firing again from his revolver.

Then he rushed up the steep hill-side at the head of his men.

A mocking laugh came wafted down from above, but the outlaws could see no one.

A fusilade from revolvers went up the hill, after which a dead silence.

"We've fixed him this time," cried one of the outlaws.

And Blazard began to entertain a hope that such was the case, when the report of a pistol from above woke the echoes, and the outlaw who had spoken fell with a bullet in his brain.

Again that mocking laugh.

"Gracious Heaven! are the demons leagued against us!" cried the captain.

He pressed on up the steep a short distance further, but no sign of the mysterious enemy was discovered.

Then it was that Blazard thought of his captive, and hurried back to camp.

The fire was dying down in a blue flickering flame, but Morton Blazard could see the tree where he had left his prisoner.

She was not there now.

With an oath the outlaw captain strode to the spot.

The cord which had bound the woman lay on the ground, cut in several pieces.

An oath fell from the lips of Blazard.

His old friend and helper, Mondo, lay dead at his feet, and Mrs. George Loudon had escaped. Surely this was enough to enrage the outlaw beyond measure.

After a few moments given to cursing, the outlaw captain turned and faced his men, who had regained the old camp-ground once more.

"Boys, the prisoner has escaped."

"We've been badly fooled," said one of the men.

"This is the work of Paul Loudon."

"And of Duke Durley."

"I believe so," returned Captain Stonby. "Our boys who went to look after Paul and the old hunter failed, it seems, to entrap them."

"An' we hev been euchred by Trapper Duke an' this young un."

Oaths of rage and chagrin were heard on every side.

"I see it all now," growled the captain. "We've been fooled by a trick, but we must not allow grass to grow under our feet until we wipe out Duke Durley and Paul Loudon."

"An' the woman, too," cried the captain.

Three of the outlaws had been shot down, leaving seven besides the captain. When Dowd returned with his men, sent out to capture Paul and the trapper, the outlaws would number thirteen all told.

"Our band has been pretty well thinned out of late," said Blazard. "I'm thinking we'll need a few recruits."

"Whor'll ye find 'em?"

"Easy enough to get a dozen men in Deadfall if we need them," returned the captain.

"And I'm opinioned thet thar's gold 'nough in Deadfall ter make us all rich ef we cud only get holt on't," said a burly villain.

"Perhaps so," returned the captain. "As Gormond I am respected in Deadfall. Even Angie don't know that I am Captain Stonby. I must return before my absence excites suspicion. I have learned where two miners have their dust secreted, and this I will soon have to divide among the boys."

"You'll hev ter look out now, cap'n," said the man who had spoken before. "Thet woman knows ye now, and——"

"She never comes to Deadfall. Leastways, I have never seen her there."

"No; but she may come now; an' Trapper Duke ar' on yer track. He's a sharp one I tell yer."

"I shall look out for myself," replied Blazard, confidently.

The dead outlaws were given burial, and placing two of their number on guard the remainder lay down to sleep.

In the light of early morning the six outlaws sent out to capture Paul and the trapper, returned; but they brought no prisoners with them.

"Didn't see hide nor ha'r o' the skunks," said Bark Dowd, who had led the men. "We laid in wait a long time whar I was sure they'd come, but 'twant no go."

"I knew it," said Blazard.

"You did, eh?"

"Yes."

"Captain Stonby then related what had happened during the absence of Dowd.

"Holy spoons!" ejaculated Dowd. "The very devil's in that young cuss. He'll be the death o' all on us yet, cuss him."

"If we don't put him out of the way he surely will," said the captian.

"By thunder! yes."

After the outlaws had partaken of breakfast, Blazard called Bark Dowd aside.

"I am going back to Deadfall," said the captain, "and I propose to leave you in command during my absence. Mondo is dead, and I trust you to fill his place."

"Couldn't trust a better man, boss."

"I believe you. During my absence you must hang round in the neighborhood of the village and put Paul

Loudon and Duke Durely out of the way if you happen to meet them; you understand?"

"I do, cap'n."

"Very good. I must be off at once."

The outlaw captain made some alteration in his toilet, which quite altered his appearance, and then set out to visit his home in Deadfall.

CHAPTER IX.

HOPES AND FEARS—FACE TO FACE.

DUKE DURLEY'S plan was a success in every particular.

Withdrawing some distance from the route followed by the outlaws, the trapper bound his prisoner to a tree, and there left him, after taking his testimony as to the whereabouts of the outlaw camp.

"Look you, boy, and tell me what you see."

"I see a little fire down among the cedars."

"We'll just creep down ther mountain and take a peep inter thet gulch," said Durley.

Darkness had fallen some time since, and the night was so dark the little gulch shone all the more brightly in contrast.

Forward crept the two men, until they were near enough to make out the outlines of the robbers.

The scene being enacted just aside from the camp was visible, and the words of Blazard, as he ordered Mondo to lay on the whip, were borne to the ears of our two friends.

Paul was considerably excited, but Trapper Duke was perfectly cool, and in a few whispered words he imparted his plans to the youth.

"Mind, now, and do as I tell ye, or the game's lost." was the parting injunction of the old trapper, as he crept away to the right.

Paul crouched low, breathless with expectancy, a drawn knife in his hand.

Of a sudden he half rose to his feet, grating his teeth.

This was when Mondo raised the heavy beech rods to strike Paul's mother.

Almost on the instant, Trapper Duke's rifle cracked and Mondo fell dead to the ground.

With a half-suppressed cry, Paul sank back to the shadows, while Duke Durley's cry to fire low, rang out like a clarion note, sending every outlaw to his feet in alarm.

When the general rush was made, Paul glided quickly forward to the side of his mother, and soon the bonds fell at her feet.

Grasping her hand, Paul uttered the one word:

"Come."

Away the two sped into the darkness.

Presently they climbed the mountain side and breathed with more freedom.

They paused and listened to the crack of carbines, and even heard the mocking laugh of Trapper Duke from the opposite hill-side.

"Heaven grant he may escape," breathed Mrs. Loudon.

"Duke Durley is too sharp for the rascals, mother," said Paul. "He is leading them off that we may make good our escape."

"Then we had best be moving."

"Yes," said Paul. "Follow me and we will soon be in a place of safety."

The two moved away, and in the course of an hour came to a halt in the edge of a clump of timber that grew on a level plot of ground under the shadow of mountain crags.

Paul then related how he fell into the trap set for him by Blazard, and how he would have certainly been killed or captured but for the timely interference of Trapper Duke.

Mrs. Loudon was deeply interested in Paul's story.

In turn she gave an account of her own experience.

Paul grated his teeth.

"That infernal devil meant to murder you, as he did my father," cried the youth, boiling with anger and indignation.

"That seemed to be his purpose," said Mrs. Loudon.

"By my soul, but I'll shoot the cowardly dog the next time I set eyes on him."

"Which you are not liable soon to do."

"I am not so sure of that," returned Paul. "He may come to Deadfall. In that place I shall meet him next, I feel sure."

"As Felix Gormond?"

"Yes."

"You are sure that Angie's father is Blazard?"

"We have Mondo's word for it, mother."

"True, but he might have deceived us. If I had ever met this Gormond I should be able to tell."

"I can describe him to you."

"Do so."

"A tall man, with keen, black eyes, and sunken hollow cheeks.

"And long black beard!"

"No, Gormond has no beard."

"Then there must be some mistake."

Paul caught at her words, hoping against hope.

"Has Blazard, or Stonby as he now calls himself, a beard?"

"Yes, a heavy one. When I knew him in Missouri he wore none. Your description of Gormond would have fitted him then, exactly."

"It is evident he was disguised to-night," returned Paul; "there can be little doubt that the two men are one and the same."

"I am in doubt," said the woman. "For Angie's sake I trust we have been deceived by Mondo."

Paul made no reply.

The two waited in the shadows for an hour.

Paul grew uneasy.

"Surely," he said, "Trapper Duke ought to have been here before this."

"Perhaps he has been unable to find this spot," was Mrs. Loudon's suggestion.

"No danger of that," Paul returned. "I fear that he exposed himself recklessly and has fallen."

This thought was strengthened as the night passed, bringing no Duke Durley.

"My soul!" groaned Paul, "if Duke Durley has fallen, we have lost the truest friend we have in this region."

Mrs. Loudon now entertained the same belief as her son, that the brave old trapper had fallen before the bullets of the robbers.

"I will go to the top of yonder crag, and take a look," said Paul. "Just withdraw into the bushes a bit, mother, until I return."

Mrs. Loudon obeyed her son's instructions, while he climbed the rugged steep, and stood on a high point of rock, gazing over the swelling ridges and deep indentations for miles. Bushes and trees obstructed his vision in some quarters.

Paul saw nothing like human beings, and he hastened back to his mother and reported.

"What shall we do, Paul?"

"I fear that Trapper Duke is dead," returned the youth, "but I will not give up looking for him. We left a prisoner about a mile from here, one of the four who assaulted and came near capturing me last night. I will go to him. Perhaps Duke went there, and it may be that he is in need of help."

"Be very careful, my son."

The youth promised and enjoined the same caution upon herself, then hurried away.

Paul had been gone but a short time when Mrs. Loudon heard the sound of steps. Listening, she heard them coming directly toward her retreat.

"It must be Paul," she thought as he parted the bushes, and peered into the opening. Instead of Paul she peered into the face of her deadly enemy, Morton Blazard.

CHAPTER X.

PAUL'S NECK IN A NOOSE.

PAUL was pretty thoroughly acquainted with the country thereabout, and he felt sure that he would experience no

trouble in finding the outlaw they had left bound to a tree the evening previous.

The youth was deeply troubled on Duke Durley's account; he was almost satisfied that the brave old man was no longer living, and in his heart he resolved to wreak vengeance on the old man's slayers.

The little patch of wood where Mrs. Loudon remained secreted was soon lost to view as Paul passed over a high elevation and descended into an opening in the hills.

In the course of an hour the young mountaineer found himself standing on the spot where the outlaw had been left the night previous.

But the prisoner was gone.

The cords that bound the villain to the tree lay on the ground. Paul examined them, and found that they had been severed by a sharp knife.

"The man's friends have been here," moaned the youth.

He dropped the breech of his gun to the ground, and stood in a musing attitude for some minutes.

Spang!

A bullet whistled in close proximity to the young hunter's head.

With the quickness of lightning Paul sprang to cover behind a rock, and gazed sharply about. He held his rifle ready for immediate use.

A puff of smoke curled up into view from a clump of cedars not far away.

Paul kept his eye on the bushes, waiting anxiously for some signs of the enemy.

An hour passed, with no signs of an enemy.

It was evident the man who had fired the shot was well aware that Paul had not been hit.

The youth became impatient.

Perhaps his enemy had departed without his seeing him.

While Paul was revolving such thoughts in his mind, his eye caught sight of something fluttering above the bushes.

A moment later the feathered head of an Indian appeared.

With quick aim the young mountaineer fired.

A wild yell answered the shot and the savage threw up his arms and fell headlong into the opening.

Paul realized that he had killed the Indian, but he was fearful lest the redskin had companions near, and so he was in no hurry to look after the fallen brave.

Half an hour longer the youth remained concealed, then he stepped boldly forth and advanced to the side of the fallen savage.

He found, on examination, that his bullet had struck the Indian in the neck, severing the large vein.

Paul thought it curious that no others of the tribe were about.

Turning from the spot after a time, the youth began to follow the route Trapper Duke and he had taken the evening previous.

His old friend might be in hiding somewhere, perhaps wounded and unable to proceed.

But a short distance had the youth proceeded, when, as he was passing near the side of a lofty elevation, he was startled by a shower of pebble-stones rattling down about his head.

Looking quickly upward, he uttered a cry of surprise and alarm.

A man stood on a narrow shelf not more than twenty feet above, a heavy carbine, aimed at Paul's head, in his hands.

"Ha! ha! ha! youngun, I've got you now," chuckled the man, whom Paul recognized as one of the outlaws, the man who had been bound and left by Duke and himself the day before.

"Stop," as Paul was about to raise his gun. "Ef ye raise yer shooter you're a dead man."

Paul realized that the villain had the drop on him and he remained passive.

"What will you have?" questioned Paul.

"Drop yer shooter."

Paul hesitated. He noted the glow of the eye that

glanced along the carbine. Death stared him in the face, but it was humiliating to voluntarily surrender to one man.

"Drop yer shooter!" again commanded the outlaw.

As the villain uttered the words the youth sprang backward a pace and raised his rifle.

Both pieces spoke together.

The thunders of Niagara seemed ringing in Paul's ears; then darkness and insensibility.

When the youth came to himself once more, he found that he lay upon the ground, with the sun kissing his upturned face.

An attempt to move showed him that he was bound hand and foot with stout cords. His head ached as though it would split, a dizzy sensation oppressing his senses.

"Hello! the cub's waked up, boys," exclaimed a voice, and a dark bearded face bent above the prostrate youth.

"Where am I?" questioned Paul with an effort.

"Can't you see whar ye are?"

"No—my head's in an awful whirl."

"Likely," grunted the man. "Sim Rutt gin ye an awful wipe wi' a club. D'ye 'member that?"

"I remember only of firing at a cursed robber; we both fired together I think. I imagine his bullet hit me somewhere."

"Well, it didn't, then."

"I was struck with a club?"

"Yes."

"And the man I fired at?"

"Is dead's a door-nail, young un."

"Good! the villain."

"Not so good as you may think, my fine cub," said another voice, and a second outlaw stood over the bound youth. "We will hang you for your tricks."

"Who are you, anyhow?"

"I am Bark Dowd, now in command of the Mountain Rangers," replied the man, drawing himself up proudly.

"You are not robbers, then?"

"No, we are gentlemen o' leisure," and the villain gave vent to a hoarse laugh.

"Where is your captain now?"

"Gone to Deadfall."

Paul remained silent for a time.

The robbers left him to his own fancies for some minutes.

At length Dowd came out and raised the prisoner to a sitting posture.

"Yes, time's up, young man."

"What do you mean?"

"That we'll sarve ye as ye did Tim Halton."

"But I was fighting in self-defense. If he had not molested me he would be alive now."

"This yere whinin' won't go down," growled Dowd. "There's a big 'count to settle. Several o' the boys hev been wiped out by you, and ole Duke——"

"Duke Durley—where is he?" cried Paul quickly.

"The deuce knows—I don't."

"He is not dead then?" cried Paul joyfully.

"Not's I knows on; but his bein' alive won't help you none."

Paul said no more.

Dowd walked away, but soon returned with a companion. They lifted Paul to his feet, and cut the cords about his legs, thus allowing the use of his limbs.

They then led him to an open place among the trees.

Here a dozen men were gathered about a tree, from a projecting limb of which dangled a rope.

Paul noted the ominous looks of the men—the dangling rope, and essayed to draw back.

"No, you don't, my hearty," snarled Dowd. "You're going to swing for it this very minute."

Paul was forced under the tree, and the rope adjusted about his neck.

The youth's face was white as death as he gazed for the last time upon the bright face of the rising sun.

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE HANDS OF A DEMON.

MRS. LOUDON could scarcely surpress a cry as she looked into the brutal face of her old enemy. The whiskers were gone now, but the keen eyes of the woman recognized the robber chief at once.

She seemed scarcely to realize her danger so great was her astonishment. When she did come to understand the necessity for concealment she attempted to draw back.

Too late!

She was discovered, and with a wild exultant cry, Blazard sprang forward and seized the woman by the arm.

"By the powers, but this is most fortunate!" exclaimed the outlaw. "You escaped me nicely last night, Mrs. Loudon, but——"

"Who are you?"

"There, that'll do," and the villain uttered a guttural laugh. "As if you did not know me."

"How should I know you? Where did I ever meet you before?" persisted the woman, anxious to deceive him if possible.

"Mary Loudon, you're a mighty sharp woman, mighty sharp, but you are lying now, when you pretend not to know me."

"I think you are Felix Gormond."

"Ah, you do? Well, you have guessed pretty near the truth, my lady. I am Felix Gormond, and on my way to Deadfall. My meeting you here was an unexpected pleasure. Of course it would not do for me to pass you by unnoticed."

"Of course not, since we are strangers."

"So much so that I feel it my duty to make myself better known to the widow of George Loudon."

As the villain spoke, he drew a cord from his pocket.

He then bound her hands securely behind her back.

"Mary, my dear, what do you say to being Mrs. Blazard? I have a fine daughter in Deadfall, who would be glad to welcome you as mother."

"You speak of Angevine?"

"I do."

"Is she your child?"

"Of course. Whose's else could she be?"

"I never heard of your being married. I thought——"

"No matter what you thought," snarled the villain, suddenly. "Just speak up and say you'll be Mrs. Blazard."

"Kill me, villain, but cease your insults."

Again he laughed.

"Don't like the idea of being my wife, eh?"

Oh, where was Paul in this, her hour of humiliation, of danger, perhaps of death? Would he not come to save his mother?

The outlaw seemed to divine her thoughts in part.

"Where is Paul?" he questioned, suddenly.

"Not far away."

The villain glanced sharply about.

"I think we'll move away from here a bit," he said, evidently fearful of an interruption.

Still grasping the woman by the arm, Blazard led the way to a more secluded nook in the wood.

"Now," said he, turning fiercely upon his prisoner, "this interview may as well come to an end at once. You have insulted me many times, Mrs. Loudon, by referring to the death of your husband, and intimating that I was his murderer——"

"I say so now, and——"

"Stop," the man interrupted. "Allow me to finish, will you? You imagine that George Loudon was cruelly treated before he died. That may be true. But your doom shall be a thousand-fold more horrible. For years you have sought me for the express purpose of taking my life. Even now your son is looking for me with the avowed intention of shooting me at sight. But he will not find me. Here and now I propose having sweet revenge for the dangers to which I have been exposed by your vindictive hatred."

He drew a long, keen-edged knife from a concealed sheath, as he spoke, and drew the edge across his thumb-nail.

"Keen as a razor," he muttered.

"Great Heavens! what would you do?" grasped the woman.

He laughed demoniacally as he examined the knife.

"You're an awful good woman, ain't you, Mary?" he said mockingly. "Prepared to die of course."

"Would you murder me?"

"Would I? Ha, ha, ha! What a question."

Mrs. Loudon saw the glow of a devilish purpose in the eyes of the monster before her. With a sudden spring she darted away, but only a few steps had she taken when her toe caught against a projecting root, and she fell heavily.

The outlaw's hand clutched the silver locks of the fallen woman, and with one jerk he brought her to her feet.

"Thought to escape, eh?" he hissed, brandishing his knife before the woman's eyes. "By the powers! I've a notion to cut your throat, and end this fuss; but no, I must see you suffer as you deserve. There's a devil in my nature that nothing but your groans can satisfy."

He thrust her against a tree, where he bound her with a stout cord.

"There, I don't think you'll run this time."

Mrs. Loudon's face was covered with blood from a wound in his forehead, which he had received in her fall.

This sight seemed to please the demon outlaw beyond measure.

"Think you're hurt some now, don't you?"

The woman made no reply.

"You won't talk, eh? Well, I'll soon fix you so that you'll never be able to again."

He advanced, and thrust his face close down to hers.

"Now I'll tell you what I'm going to do, Mary, my dear," he hissed, fiercely. "I'm going to cut out your insulting woman's tongue. Ha! you tremble. You think I dare not do it; we shall see."

He drew back a pace, glanced sharply about for a moment, then advanced once more with his knife clutched firmly.

"Oh, my soul!" gasped the poor woman; "be merciful! Do not murder me by inches!"

The villain laughed a hideous hyena laugh.

"Merciful!" he sneered. "Yes, I will be. I'll cut out your gabbling tongue, and then, when I think you've suffered enough, I'll finish the work with this."

He tapped the butt of his revolver as he spoke.

"Inhuman monster!"

"Exactly," raising his knife.

"Spare me, Morton Blazard!" moaned the half-fainting woman.

"Can't do it. He! he! he!"

"Kill me if you will, but—but do not torture me thus."

"It's the torture that pleases me," sneered the brutal ruffian. "You thought to take my life in revenge for the death of your husband. You failed, and now—but pshaw! what's the use fooling any longer. See, I'll have your tongue on the point of my little toy here in no time."

He poised his knife aloft, then advanced, leaning forward, the fires of Hades flashing from his eyes.

With a gasping cry Mary Loudon closed her eyes, and lost consciousness.

CHAPTER XII.

THE END OF HIS RACE—CONCLUSION.

"SNAKES an' alligators!"

The demon executioner turned from his work with a startled thrill shooting through his frame.

He found himself confronted by a man clad in bear-skin, holding a revolver to his head.

"Hev ye murdered the woman?" questioned Trapper Duke, with a tremor of anger in his voice.

"N—no," stammered the outlaw, sheathing his knife and laying his hand on the butt of his revolver.

"You lie, Morton Blazard. The woman is dead."

The outlaw drew his revolver, but he did not use it.

With a stunning blow Trapper Duke felled the villain to the ground.

The next moment he was upon the fallen man and quickly disarmed him, after which he proceeded to bind Blazard hand and foot.

"Toads an' pothooks, man," ejaculated the trapper, "did ye expect ter worst Trapper Duke?"

The bound ruffian gnashed his teeth in rage.

The tables had been turned most effectually, and a sense of some terrible danger entered the outlaw's brain.

The trapper rose to his feet and turned to Mrs. Loudon.

To his surprise she had opened her eyes and was staring at the fallen outlaw in dazed wonder.

"Who are you? What does this mean?" cried the woman, in a wondering tone.

"You shall know who I am pretty soon," said the trapper. "Fust, I'll cut these cords so't you'll feel more comfortable like."

Suiting actions to words, the trapper severed the cords that bound Mrs. Loudon to the tree.

She tottered and sank to a seat on a rock.

"Thet pizen cuss meant ter kill ye, I reckon," said the trapper, indicating the outlaw with his hand.

"Yes. He would have tortured me horribly, too," and the woman related all that had happened.

"We'll fix him putty soon," growled Duke Durley.

"If I had been armed he would not be alive now," said the woman.

"You hate him awfully?"

"I have good reason to. He murdered my husband."

"In Missouri?"

"Yes."

"Thought so. He war a pesky guerrilla then."

"Yes. You seem to know the villain's history."

"I ain't a stranger to it," returned the trapper, as he stood before the woman in a thoughtful attitude.

"Where is Paul? I expected ter find him here."

"You are Duke Durley, then?" cried the woman, a joyous ring in her voice.

"I am Duke Durley, ma'am."

"Paul waited until late this morning for you to come," said Mrs. Loudon. "Your long delay caused him to fear that you had fallen before the bullets of Blazard's outlaws. He went, some time ago, in search of his friend—yourself."

"Exactly," muttered Duke.

"Do you think he has run into danger, sir?"

"Mebbe; can't tell. No, I warn't hit by the bullets o' the pesky robbers, an' I did 'gree ter meet Paul near here, but, you see, I tuck another idee into my head."

"Well?"

"I went to Deadfall and got a passel o' men together, led by ole Tom Duncan, as good a hunter's thar is in these diggins. I told him whar he'd find the outlaws camped, an' I expect he's grabbed 'em before this time."

"You did not accompany him, then?"

"No. I was anxious to meet Paul here. 'Fore I left town, howsever, I called on Miss Angevine Gormond."

"What's that?" growled the outlaw.

"I called on Angevine Gormond," said the trapper, suddenly changing his voice. "It was as I expected. Gormond and this villain here are the same. Blazard has trained under a dozen aliases, the last two being Stonby and Gormond. In one hour's talk with Angevine I learned the truth."

The trapper paused.

"Go on, sir," cried the woman, eagerly.

"Angevine is not the daughter of this vile outlaw."

"Not his child. Who then?"

"Mrs. Loudon, do you remember a Missouri planter named Warren?"

"Prince Warren?"

"Yes, I remember the family well."

"Some time after the war, Warren's family was merci-

lessly butchered by Morton Blazard and a gang of outlaws. Wife and two sons lay weltering in their blood, when the planter returned from a visit to a neighboring village. A thousand dollars were taken from a desk in Mrs. Warren's room.

"Prince Warren was well nigh crazed at the awful sight. For a time he hardly knew where he was. When he come to realize the situation, he learned that his little three-year-old daughter was not among the dead. A careful seaech revealed no traces of the lost child.

"Warren remembered then the words spoken one day by Blazard, some years before, during the progress of the war. In some way Warren had offended the guerrilla, and he vowed to revenge himself some day.

"This was his revenge. Little Bessie was in the hands of Warren's enemy, to be brought up in sin and shame. With his eyes turned toward heaven, Prince Warren swore an oath of vengeance against Morton Blazard and his gang. For years he has followed the worker of his family's ruin. To-day Prince Warren found his lost Bessie, and to-day he'll wreak vengeance upon her abductor."

The trapper paused, and turned from the woman to confront Blazard, who had assumed a sitting posture.

For a minute eye looked into eye, as the two faced each other.

"Just Heaven, preserve us!" gasped the outlaw, "it is Prince Warren!"

"I am Prince Warren!" thundered the trapper. "As Duke Durley I have shadowed you to your doom, vilest of devils!"

"Mercy!" gasped Blazard, his face blanched to an ashen hue.

"Yes, I will be merciful," said Warren. "You allowed my child, my Bessie, to grow up virtuous and good, for this I am disposed to be merciful——"

"Bless you, Prince," cried the outlaw. "I gave the girl a chance. She is educated——"

"Stop! I cannot argue the point. Mrs. Loudon, you will withdraw if you do not care to see how a coward dies."

The woman understood the full meaning conveyed in the words of the wronged old man. Though she had taken it upon herself to avenge her husband's death, yet her wrongs paled before those this man suffered, and to him belonged the right to execute judgment upon Morton Blazard.

She hurried from the spot. The report of a pistol followed her, ringing sharply in her ears.

Five minutes later the trapper came out to where Mrs. Loudon stood. His face wore a smile.

"It's all over," he said, in answer to her look. "The carcass lies yonder for the vultures to dissect."

Mrs. Loudon drew a long breath of evident relief.

"Shall we look for Paul?"

"We will wait here," said Warren. "It was here that Tom and the boys were to meet me after wiping out the outlaws."

Anxious hours passed.

It was afternoon when a dozen stout miners appeared before Warren and Mrs. Loudon, and with them was Paul, who had given up all hope when rescued from the jaws of death by the men Prince Warren had sent to destroy the outlaws.

"Did you take no prisoners?" asked Warren.

"None," said Tom Duncan, grimly. "We wiped 'em clean out. Ther'll be no funder trouble from Stonby's gang."

* * * * *

In the home of the infamous Blazard, *alias* Gormond, Prince Warren's story was again told. Bessie Warren was glad to find her father in the good man who has figured in these pages as Trapper Duke.

Paul and Bessie were reconciled, and the Warrens, with Mrs. Loudon and Paul, returned East, having fulfilled their mission. Paul and Bessie were united on reaching St. Louis.

[THE END.]

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